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NEW ATROCITY CHARGE COULD HURT REAGAN'S NICARAGUAN REQUEST
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WASHINGTON

President Reagan's bid to win aid for Nicaraguan rebels is facing a new public relations problem, with allegations from a former rebel commander that the U.S.-backed rebels commit widespread atrocities.

The charges come from Jose Efren Martinez Mondragon, who this week became the first rebel commander to return to leftist-ruled Nicaragua under a government amnesty program.

In an interview and news conference, Martinez Mondragon said rebel troops routinely murder, kidnap and rape Nicaraguan civilians who refuse to cooperate with the effort to overthrow the government. He said many of the victims are buried in secret cemeteries inside Honduras.

A Senate Intelligence Committee official, who insisted on anonymity, said the Republican-controlled panel would look at the new allegations, which he said are "of very great interest to us." The House Intelligence Committee was also expected to examine the charges.

On Wednesday, the Reagan administration and a Nicaraguan rebel spokesman disputed the allegations.

Bosco Matamoros, spokesman for the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the chief rebel group known by the initials FDN, dismissed the new charges as "outright lies" and "a clear part of a campaign carried out by the Sandinistas," Nicaragua's leftist rulers.

Deputy State Department spokesman Edward Djerejian said the administration has seen "no information which would substantiate the specific charges," although adding that it condemns "all acts of terror and violence directed against civilians."

Private American human rights groups also have accused FDN forces of widespread human rights abuses. U.S. intelligence sources, speaking anonymously, have also said FDN atrocities have occurred although the administration insists the abuses are isolated.

FDN officials have generally dismissed the allegations as part of a Sandinista propaganda campaign, but have acknowledged that three officers were executed in late 1983 after being court-martialed for going on a rampage that included raping and murdering civilians.

Martinez Mondragon, 26, a mid-level rebel commander, sought refuge in the Mexican Embassy in Honduras two months ago and then flew to Mexico before returning to Nicaragua on Tuesday.

Martinez Mondragon also said the Honduran, Salvadoran and Guatemalan armies have supplied the rebels with the bulk of their ammunition and other military supplies since CIA funds were halted a year ago.

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In response to that claim, State Department spokesman Djerejian said the United States is not providing funds to third countries for the purpose of supporting covert activities in Central America.

FDN spokesman Matamoros said the Sandinistas might have threatened Martinez Mondragon's relatives inside Nicaragua as a way to blackmail him into making the charges. Matamoros added that Martinez Mondragon had a woman friend he FDN suspects was a Sandinista spy.

Matamoros flatly denied Martinez Mondragon's specific charge that he came across a group of 40 families last August who said they had been abducted by Contras who had killed eight young men and raped eight women.

Matamoros said Martinez Mondragon's unit operated at least 200 kilometers from the site where the supposed encounter occurred.

"This is a clear part of a campaign carried out by the Sandinistas," Matamoros said. "He is just repeating the Sandinista line. ... This campaign is to try to distract from Mr. (Daniel) Ortega's trip to the Soviet Union."

Last week, Nicaraguan president Ortega went to the Soviet Union to request \$200 million in economic aid for Nicaragua's shattered economy. President Reagan has implemented economic sanctions against Nicaragua and is pressing Congress for \$14 million in new aid for the Contras.

The CIA funneled about \$80 million to the Contras until last year when Congress cut off the aid.